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Can Sectionalism be Good for Solidarity? Some evidence from the maritime construction industry on Tyneside.

Jo McBride

Abstract

Abstract

Sectionalism has historically been viewed as negative in that it isolates workers from a shared sense of a collective identity thereby weakening solidarity. This paper considers the alternative argument that sectionalism can be good for solidarity. It does this by measuring the collective identity of the workforce in the Tyneside Maritime Construction Industry (TMCI) using mobilization theory as a tool for measurement. It discovers that the collective identity does not necessarily develop in one setting but can develop in different stages and at different levels. It also finds that workers may have an association with different collective identities and that the collective identity may take different forms. The collective identity can also divide as well as unite, which implies 'solidarity within sectionalism', and in turn this brings positivity to the TMCI workforce's shared collective identity.

Keywords

Industrial relations, labour history, sociology, strikes, trade unions

Introduction

Debates relating to sectionalism revolve around two main themes. One view is that it isolates workers from a shared sense of collective identity thereby ultimately weakening solidarity (Hobsbawm, 1978; also see Kelly, 1988). Others argue that it can play a positive role in helping to create unity in a workplace (Gall, 1998, 2008) or a class consciousness (Hyman, 1975; Marren, 2009). This paper considers whether sectionalism can in fact be good for solidarity¹. It does this by setting out to measure the strength of the collective identity of a workforce historically renowned for problems with sectionalism², the maritime construction industry on Tyneside (TMCI), and conducts this using approaches associated with mobilisation theory.

These approaches are used as it is argued that they construct conceptual frameworks that are useful in helping us to dissect the collective relationship and analyse the different processes by which individual workers define their interests and identities in collective terms (Kelly, 1998). Furthermore, as any

¹ It focuses on solidarity primarily as the 'collective identity' of people acting together in pursuit of common interests (Tilly, 1978).

² Here, sectionalism can be defined as competition between specific *trades* claiming exclusive rights to work tasks.

empirical work using these approaches is fairly sparse, using these here will also help to contribute to the growing number of studies using mobilisation theory to measure workplace collective identity. Indeed, using these approaches also uncovers some key issues that have the potential to push those debates further, for the empirical data reveals significant findings not drawn out as an important part of analysis in mobilisation theories. The article reveals a dynamic, unpredictable and complex set of intraorganisational relations amongst the workforce. Yet, despite these complexities, the workers' relationship continues to constitute a robust collective identity. This suggests that sectionalism can in fact be good for solidarity. However, this is not as straightforward as it initially appears and, in order to address this question, this article unravels some of the complexities of sectionalism and solidarity.

First, it examines whether sectionalism continues to exist in the TMCI despite the huge changes in the industry in recent decades. If so, then it will consider how it is manifested and the manner in which sectional interests are perceived, articulated and enforced. Secondly, it examines whether a clear sense of a collective identity exists in the TMCI and how this is manifested. Finally, it considers whether sectionalism is harmful to the collective identity in terms of weakening its organisation and ability to take collective action in the form of people acting together in pursuit of common interests.

The question of sectionalism

Commentators have offered conflicting views on the issue of sectionalism. Critics have argued that sectional consciousness, organisation and actions are all a barrier to the creation of collective interests (see Kelly, 1988). Indeed, Hobsbawm referred to the rise in sectionalism after the Second World War as a 'significant and unwelcome development' (1978:283). This sectionalism was defined as, "...a *growing division of workers into sections and groups, each pursuing its own economic interests irrespective of the rest.*" (1978:284). Hobsbawm argued that such sectional forms of struggle alienated workers from a shared sense of class-consciousness and risked weakening the labour movement as a whole. Later, Fairbrother (1989) also raised concerns about sectionalism. In his 'union renewal thesis', he claimed that, in the private sector, the sectionalism often found in traditional manufacturing, might weaken the resistance of workplace organisation. Therefore, one of the stated 'necessary prerequisites' for successful workplace union renewal was to 'overcome sectionalism' (ibid.25-26). In a critique of this thesis, Gall (1998) argued that care should be taken in criticising sectionalism, for he claimed that it can play a positive role in helping to create solidarity. Although he does acknowledge that sectionalism may be a barrier to achieving the support of one group of workers for another, he also argues that it can also prove to positively benefit workers depending on the circumstances and issues. For instance, he suggests that smaller sectional disputes can lead to larger collective disputes, in which the workers may be joined by other sections in support and will therefore have more bargaining strength,

Sectional fights can represent the ignition or beginning of a larger, more generalised fight around certain issues whereby other sections of workers take heart from the fight mounted and they enter into that struggle in a manner which benefits all those workers concerned. (1998:154)

In a more recent paper, he reiterates his key argument of the positivity of sectionalism in stating that,

...in a period of retreat for labour unionism since 1979, sectionalism can be viewed in a quite different and more positive manner, whereby its resilience allows the distinct, occupational interests of workers to be more effectively represented. (2008:357)

He provides evidence to show that it does continue to exist in some areas, notably finance and journalism, demonstrating that how, in journalism in particular, workers have used sectionalist representation based on their profession to defend and advance their interests.

Indeed, it is argued in this article that, aside from the above input, the subject of sectionalism is lacking in current industrial relations research and does not appear to have received much attention since the 1960s and 1970s. Even then, the view of sectionalism was overwhelmingly negative from very different and ideologically opposed positions. An exception to the pessimism of the effects of sectionalism during that time was that of Hyman (1975). He suggested that

The immediate context of the world of work is *necessarily* sectional: it is in fragmented contexts that men and women share their hopes and fears, their humour and dejection, as well as the everyday routines of their employment; that they form loyalties and attachments, identify common interests, realise the strength to be gained from collective action...Sectional solidarities...may be integrative or divisive. Their implications depend crucially on the manner in which sectional interests are perceived, articulated and enforced in isolation from, opposition to, or conjunction with those of other groups of workers. The nature of one group's attitudes and actions encourages a reciprocal response from others, thus establishing a pattern of relationship within the class which will contain contradictory pressures and tendencies but may be predominantly solidaristic or antagonistic (ibid:178).

These points raised by Hyman are central to this article. His work adds another crucial dimension to the findings that follow,

And to note a further dimension of complexity: the effect of some issues tends to be inherently unifying, others the reverse; hence the same groups may be simultaneously allies and opponents (ibid:178-179)

The findings in this article provide evidence to support this statement. In doing so, they aim to add a further contribution to the debates in attempting to unravel these complexities of sectionalism and solidarity. It aims to contribute to the view of Hyman (1975) and other more contemporary studies (Gall, 1998, 2008) that demonstrate that sectionalism can be positive and may also be beneficial to maintaining solidarity. However, the first issue is how is this to be deduced, for in order to identify levels sectionalism and solidarity, they clearly need to be measured in some way. Sectionalism may (on the surface) seem fairly straightforward to identify, but this article demonstrates it is more complex, so how do we measure its complexities as also anticipated above? Furthermore, how do we measure solidarity or the collective interest definition and identities of a workforce? In order to address these questions, it is argued in this article that, conceptually, Kelly (1998) proposes the most promising way to achieve this. He suggests that using theoretical approaches associated with both social movement theory and mobilisation theory may help to gain a clearer understanding of the ways in which workers define their interests and identities in collective terms. It is these approaches that will be used as tools for measurement for the purposes of this article. In order to determine the value of these approaches to an empirical investigation of workplace collectivism, they are discussed in depth in the following section.

Measuring the collective identity using Mobilisation Theory and Social Movement Theory

These theoretical approaches are being used to measure the collective identity for it is argued that they provide a useful conceptual framework to help us to think rigorously and analytically about the conditions under which individual workers define their interests and identities in collective terms based around notions of 'injustice' (Kelly, 1998). It is argued that the use of these theories will promote a greater understanding of the significance of injustice as a crucial factor underlying the willingness of individuals to act collectively in pursuit of common interests and share a collective identity.

An individual's perception of 'injustice', according to some social movement theorists, can be measured in different ways using 'collective action frames' (see Snow & Bedford, 1992). McAdam (1988) suggests that if any aspects of a worker's workplace 'system' lose legitimacy, then there will be the belief that the rules and arrangements are 'illegitimate', 'wrong' or 'unjust'. Furthermore, in the process of adopting an injustice frame, Gamson (1992b) claims that it is insufficient if individuals privately adopt a different interpretation of what is happening and, for the collective adoption of an injustice frame, the potential challengers must share it in a public way. In this manner, situations are collectively defined as unjust and grievances are then transformed into demands. He and McAdam (1988), refer to this type of situation as the '*micromobilisation*' context, which is the collective setting of physical interaction in which all of these processes are brought together.

It is suggested that it is within such a setting that the shared collective definition of injustice will be recognised as being in opposition to another agency or group. Such 'us and them' attitudes relate directly to *social identification*³ and are perceived as essential to mobilising frames, for it is suggested that the collective identity must be oppositional (Fantasia, 1988; Gamson, 1992a). The reason for an action by one group will be explained by another group through '*attributions*' of blame or injustice. Such injustices need to be directed at an agency or a target for collective action, rather than impersonal forces that cannot be used as targets such as 'the market' or 'global competition' (Badigannavar & Kelly, 2005). It is also suggested by both B and P.G. Klandermans (1984) that 'expectancy-value' theory, or calculating the costs and benefits of the perceived efficacy of being involved in collective action, needs to be taken into consideration. Therefore, it is also suggested that the move to taking collective action is a complex process of convincing and activating, hence persuasion, and by implication, *leadership* must play a major role in mobilising. Hence, the major factors believed to be important to social movement theorists, in terms of what motivates individuals into taking collective action, are *leadership, social identification, attribution and injustice*. Another approach that is arguably useful in examining factors that stimulate individuals into acting collectively is 'mobilisation theory' developed by Tilly (1978).

Tilly identifies five components in his analysis of collective action. The first, and at the centre of the approach, is simply the way in which people come to define their *interests* (ibid:7). Secondly, in their *organisation*, which he refers to, *...the aspects of the group's structure which most directly affects its capacity to act on its interests* (ibid.) *Mobilisation* is the third factor and is described as the *...process by which a group goes from being a passive collection of individuals to an active participant* (ibid:69). The fourth element, *opportunity*, is divided into three factors; changes in the balance of power between groups, the costs of repression on the subordinate group by the ruling group and the opportunities available to the subordinate group to go in pursuit of their claims. On this point, Kelly (1998:25) notes that the ruling group may also engage in 'counter-mobilisation', whereby they try to prevent the subordinate group from achieving effective mobilisation or collective organisation. Finally, Tilly suggests that *collective action*, or people acting together in pursuit of common interests, results from the changing combinations of these four elements and can take diverse forms according to the different balances between the four components⁴.

It is argued that these approaches offer significant advantages in providing a useful conceptual framework in helping to measure the collective identity (Kelly 1998). Although there have been questions raised concerning some limitations of using the theory (Cunningham, 2008; Gall, 2000a, 2000b), these

³ An individual' identification with a job/skill/trade allowing for a clear social definition of group membership.

⁴ It is this definition and type of 'collective action' that is the key definition used in this article.

authors and several others (Badigannavar & Kelly, 2005; Brown Johnson & Jarley, 2004; Buttigieg et al, 2008; Metochi, 2002; Moore and Read, 2006) have utilised this approach to measure the presence (and/or absence) of collective organisation successfully. Yet despite the growing debate on the usefulness of the theories, such empirical work remains fairly sparse, is based primarily on public sector analysis and with a focus of a more quantitative than qualitative nature. It is therefore the intention of this article to contribute to this debate by using these theories to measure the collective identity of the TMCI workforce using a qualitative approach in a private sector industry. This will be conducted by breaking down, dissecting and analysing the processes and conditions by which individual workers acquire a collective definition of interests and act together in pursuit of common interests. It is expected that this will also help to understand the manner in which sectional interests might also be perceived, articulated and enforced.

This is, of course, in anticipation that sectionalism does exist in this industry. If so, then it must be queried as to whether sectionalism is in any way damaging to the workforce in terms of acting together in pursuit of common interests. The paper as follows is split into three sections: a brief historical industrial relations background in order to understand the character of sectionalism in this industry; the measurement of the collective identity of the TMCI workforce and finally, an analysis of whether sectionalism can be good for solidarity.

Background to case study, method and setting: a brief historical development of industrial relations in the Tyneside Maritime Construction Industry (TMCI)

Traditionally referred to as the shipbuilding industry, the development and strength of workplace union organisation, and problems with sectionalism in this industry, are historically well documented (Brown *et al.*, 1972; Clark, 1997a, 1997b; Eldridge, 1968; Webb S&B, 1920). However, there have been massive changes in this industry due to a period of rapid decline. The sector has experienced severe economic decline through a dramatic period of restructuring and a reduction in contracts in the face of foreign competition. Trade union organisation was inevitably challenged through the decline of the shipbuilding industry (Stirling & Bridgford, 1985) and particularly the period of trade union mergers which challenged the old sectional strengths. Also, a managerial offensive has led to a temporary and itinerant workforce and, in some companies, trade union derecognition. The companies involved in the TMCI now operate in an uncertain fluctuating market where many of the workers are on short-term contracts. It might not be surprising to find then, that the numbers of the skilled workforce have depleted dramatically. Yet despite this incredible decline, shop steward organisation and workplace union organisation remain very strong and effective in this industry (McBride, 2004, 2006), as does evidence of sectionalism.

This might suggest that sectionalism may be good for solidarity, yet there are questions that remain such as how and why has sectionalism survived during this period of rapid decline? And why was it such an issue historically in the

industry? It would therefore be useful to briefly consider the historical background of the industry in order to help to understand the character of this industry, how sectionalism is defined in the industry, how it developed to such enormous levels and what happened to sectionalism in the period of decline.

The first issue that identifies sectionalism in this industry is the subject of skill, craft standards and quality of work. From the late medieval period the shipwrights as the principal skilled craft workers in shipbuilding produced clear sets of rules and regulations controlling craft standards and entry into the trade. It was the responsibility of each shipwright to ensure the quality of his own work and members were fined if their product was perceived to be "...poor work..." (Clarke,1997:13). Many of their traditional customs and practices have been adopted throughout history by the craft workers in the industry. In particular, pride and quality of work, control of craft standards and entry into the trade. However, massive changes to the trades and their skills was threatened with the introduction of technological advancements to the sector. These technological changes, from wood to iron to steel ships, introduced different labour processes to the production of ships with new distinct phases, from design to fitting out, all of which required a wider range of skills, new working methods, new machinery, new trades and new trade unions. As specific trades began to claim exclusive rights to work tasks, conflict was instigated between the trades involved and their trade unions¹. Trade union sectionalism became embedded in these divisions in the labour process (Eldridge, 1968). Eldridge also claims that this allowed for a clear social definition of group membership,

"...the mystery of the craft...passed on from generation to generation. Tricks of the trade, standards of workmanship, pride in one's work, are the marks of such a sociological inheritance involved in the transmission of skills." (ibid:93)

He claims that norms and values were internalised through such patterns leading to a social cohesion within the craft group that is *culturally* induced.

"It may be inferred that membership of such an occupational group was of central importance in the life experience of the group member." (ibid.)

Therefore, the occupational identity was also clearly viewed as important to workers of different trades. Nonetheless, the sectionalism that had evolved was extremely complex and problems with demarcation disputes in the Tyneside industry during this period reached enormous proportions (Webb S and B,1920).

Insert Table 1 here

Clearly, it was the different degrees of technical development combined with the cyclical nature of the industry's market which led to an entrenchment of sectionalism due to workers' protecting the skills and tasks of their particular trade at every level of change. This was also noted decades later in reports and inquiries into British shipbuilding. For instance, the Geddes Report in the 1960s (Cmnd., 2937, see also Roberts, 1967) also highlighted the problems with demarcation, the division of labour and sectionalism,

...the early development of division of labour among shipyard workers has hardened into a rigid craft structure under which each man has been trained to keep his own job. (Cmnd., 2937:12).)

The report claimed that it was a deep feeling of insecurity which was the root of demarcation issues "...commonly known as 'restrictive' but which the workers describe as 'protective'." (ibid:103). In order to solve demarcation problems, the report recommended a solution that had been attempted to be pioneered for decades; the introduction of flexibility and interchangeability⁵.

The Commission on Industrial Relations (CIR) Report on Shipbuilding and Shiprepairing was designed to assess progress in the industry since the Geddes Report. It also aimed to consider developments achieved under the 1967 and 1969 Agreements⁶ and found that, although some advances had been attained, 'independent control' and 'sectional interests' combined together remained to prevent measures of reform and the achievement of full success (Cm., 4756:141). Indeed, the report found that there continued to be 'independent control' by trade unions over a wide area of common concern. The report strongly suggested that the key 'problem'⁷ was the persistence of sectionalism and, as had been recommended several times previously, suggested that this could only be overcome by formalising bargaining procedures. However, McGoldrick (1983:213-214) argues that,

...the sectionalism which it sought to combat had its deepest roots which would not be removed by setting up company procedures...In practice the CIR report had little impact on industrial relations in the industry.

Brown et al (1972:40) also claimed that the CIR was flawed in that, in discussing sectionalism, it did not make a distinction between the 'trade' and the 'workgroup' and argued that "*The loyalties of shipbuilding workers are many sided and more complex than the C.I.R apparently recognises*". This continues to be relevant today and is a key to this article, in particular a crucial reason why it is argued that the notion of 'sectionalism' needs to be unravelled.

In sum then, the historical development of shipbuilding generated a growth of sectionalism through the control of skill, craft standards and quality of work built around the 'trade' and occupational identity. Technological advancements intensified sectionalism by regenerating production processes that required new skills, new trades and new trade unions. The trades', in protecting their jobs, continuously claimed exclusive rights to new tasks and trade union sectionalism became embedded in the labour process itself where

⁵ This is still being attempted today and continues to fail in its implementation.

⁶ In attempting to help resolve the noted industrial relations problems in the industry, the Geddes report recommended a National Procedure Agreement for avoidance of disputes, and a National Demarcation Agreement to update the 1912 agreement. Both of these agreements were established in 1967 and 1969 consecutively.

⁷ The 'problems' were clearly managements', not the trade unions'.

it still exists today. However, as mentioned earlier, this industry and its workforce have witnessed some enormous changes in recent decades and the numbers of workers has declined dramatically.

Method and Setting: The TMCI

During the 1960s and 70s, the whole industry employed just over 100,000 workers (Brown *et al.*, 1972). At the time of the fieldwork the industry on Tyneside employed approximately 1000 manual workers. Due to fluctuations in orders in this industry, most of the companies do not have a core workforce rather they employ workers when they require trades essential to certain orders and stages of the production process. Therefore, the majority of the TMCI workforce are on short term contracts to the length of time of the order and production, and then made redundant at the end of the contract. Many of these skilled workers travel around the country's shipyards or go abroad to find work in between contracts on the Tyne. If the full quota of skilled workers is not available for an unexpected contract, the companies on the River Tyne employ subcontractors when more skilled employees are required to complete a client contract within a desired time-scale.

There remains to be a multi union custom and trade unions involved in the industry at the time of fieldwork were the GMB, Unite⁸ and UCATT with the former two possessing the highest membership. For reasons of confidentiality, the companies involved in the study are referred to as Ship Repair Ltd, Shipbuilders.Co and Refit PLC. The research consisted of three case study companies that involved 39 semi structured interviews with managers, shop stewards, convenors, full time officers, regional and national officials. Structured self-completion questionnaires were issued to the workforce with the percentage of responses received being 65% from Ship Repair, 59% from Shipbuilders and 28% from Refit PLC. This workforce data was supplemented with more qualitative data through the use of multiple methods such as observation of whole workforce meetings with shop stewards, management and shop steward meetings, national combine committee shop steward meetings, direct participation through 'training' as a welder on the shop floor and non-participation through generally 'hanging around' the shop stewards' offices and meeting workers on an impromptu basis as they visited the offices. Finally, this data was supported by secondary sources such as regional trade union minutes and the regional press in the North East.

In what follows, the article will analyse the collective identity of the TMCI workforce as it is in the present day using mobilisation theory as a tool for measurement. It aims to answer the central question of this study as to whether sectionalism is good for solidarity. In doing so, it needs to also address a few other questions. The first question must ask whether a strong sense of a collective identity exists in the TMCI and, as discussed earlier, this

⁸ The interviewees continued to use the previous trade union names Amicus, AEEU and MSF which have been left in the interview quotes that follow.

will be measured based on the notion of injustice. Also, it will be considered whether it is homogenous as assumed by much of the collectivism literature or more fragmented as suggested by Hyman (1975:178). Secondly, a crucial question that must also be addressed is whether sectionalism still exists in the industry despite the enormous changes in recent decades. If so, then how is it manifested and how are sectional interests perceived, articulated and enforced? Finally, the study will examine whether there is any evidence to suggest that sectionalism is harmful to the collective in terms of weakening its organisation and ability to take collective action in the way of people acting together in pursuit of common interests. In what follows, these questions are addressed through the empirical data.

Measuring the workplace collective identity in the TMCI using approaches associated with mobilisation theory

A major intention of this study was to discover whether there was a shared sense of a collective identity in the TMCI workforce using approaches associated with mobilisation theory as a tool for measurement. Firstly, the key element of these approaches, the notion of 'injustice', is considered. It will be examined if, how and why certain situations or actions could be perceived as *unjust*. Examples are provided from all of the companies involved in the study illustrating how a sense of *injustice* by workers could be identified in several different ways. It is not specific issues identified as injustices that will be discussed here, rather *how* the interpretations of injustice were shared amongst the workers and developed into a shared sense of a collective identity. These following examples are provided through the analysis of injustice frames.

Gamson (1992) argued that in terms of the process of collectively adopting an *injustice frame*, the interpretation of injustice must be shared in a public way, with the whole workforce aware that it is being shared. This was clearly identified at Shipbuilders.Co and Refit PLC in their whole workforce mass meetings and monthly workforce grouse meetings. I was an observer at both these types of meetings at both companies and examined the group interaction. They provided clear evidence of the workforce articulating their grievances and attempting to influence the stewards on issues they perceived were a sense of injustice, thereby, sharing their individual perceptions of injustice collectively. The meetings also provided evidence of the assertion of rights to demands and the belief that the workers have the capacity to alter a situation they perceive as unjust (Tilly, 1978). There were high levels of attendance which suggested that the workplace collective identity was healthy in terms of the workforce taking collective forms of activity to defend their immediate interests. Furthermore, in terms of the perceived costs and benefits of participation in collective action (B and P.G.Klandermans, 1984), the workers appeared to be familiar with the means of action and capable of participating in the knowledge that others will also participate. These two types of workforce meetings were the best examples of a *micromobilisation* setting in which individual interpretations of injustice could be shared publicly and developed into a collectively shared definition (McAdam, 1988). Yet, although the grouse meetings were regular at Shipbuilders.Co, the mass

meetings, whereby workers are able to collectively air their grievances, were not regular in any of the companies, thereby preventing effective mobilisation taking place. Nonetheless, it is the extremely efficient organised group structure in the TMCI that allows for the workforce to share their grievances in different ways, mainly through effective *leadership* (see McBride, 2004) and the following provides some examples of this.

In one instance, a shop steward acknowledged that not all of the men⁹ are willing to raise issues at mass meetings in any case,

There's a lot of people who are unhappy about things but not prepared to say it. I mean if you've got a situation where you've got 200 blokes there, you mightn't feel very comfortable speaking out.

In order to try to minimise this difficulty and ensure full participation, the shop stewards will take issues raised from joint shop stewards committee (JSSC) meetings to their single trade section meetings. In this way they are able to hold discussions with workers on the shop floor in smaller numbers, as explained by plumbers' shop steward John,

... I get them in little groups and explain different things rather than take them into a big meeting, bearing in mind we've only got 22 plumbers, and I'll explain the situation.

These individual trade/section shop stewards then return any concerns or questions to the following JSSC meeting for discussion which is held at least once a month. Another way in which workers share their grievances is on an informal day to day basis, particularly if they are small trades, as highlighted by the drillers' shop steward,

Well it's more or less when you're sitting have your tea together, if there's anything to discuss or anything that needs to be brought up...in my department anyway, I don't know about the other departments...I mean there's only 3 or 4 of us and we sit and have our tea up in the shed so if there's any problems or anything like that we talk about it then.

These examples are significant evidence to this article for they demonstrate how a shared definition of a collective identity does not necessarily develop in only one context of physical interaction as mobilisation theory would imply. Rather here, the evidence demonstrates how it develops through different stages, from an injustice identified and shared at the small trade section meeting in the shed, then taken to the larger JSSC meetings, and then to a whole workforce meeting. There is another piece of evidence that also queries the notion that the collective identity of a workforce develops, or even exists, in only one context of physical interaction. This is where it was discovered that a shared sense of an injustice and collective identity extends *beyond* the boundaries of the organisation to the whole regional industry.

This was best demonstrated in a show of solidarity by all workers in the TMCI with a mass walkout in support of unofficially striking subcontracted workers. This was due to a perceived injustice by 98 subcontracted workers (employed across three different yards on the TMCI)¹⁰ that they were receiving a lesser

⁹ The manual workforce in the TMCI was an all male workforce at the time of fieldwork.

¹⁰ These workers were employed by subcontractor S&V Services Ltd in three of the yards on the Tyne, not by the companies directly.

pay rate than fellow workers of the same trade. The entire TMCI workforce also viewed this pay differential as an injustice and walked out unofficially in solidarity with the subcontracted workers. Hence, here, we can see how a perceived injustice was acquired as a shared collective definition of interests resulting in the regional TMCI workforce acting together in pursuit of common interests. This is an important finding, for what can be viewed here is a notion of a 'regional workforce collective identity'. Indeed, there is another significant factor linked to this that is arguably also an important finding. For the notion of a 'regional collective identity' could also be argued to extend to a 'national collective identity'. This was discovered in evidence during the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Union (CSEU) shop stewards' meetings. These meetings are national meetings of senior shop stewards and convenors of all the national maritime industries in which they discuss issues that may affect their employment,

We go to combine meetings at Carlisle...so we find out what's going on up and down the country...we meet through the CSEU either bi-monthly or tri-monthly and basically all the lads from all over the country come and meet there. What we do is, we have a strategy where they tell us what's going on in their yards and we see if we can do anything to help them, and we tell them what's going on on the Tyne and they think of anything that can help us.

As an observer at a few of these meetings, it was evident that 'what's going on' included discussing perceived injustices by one workforce, or region, which were shared collectively. Once more it demonstrated evidence of workers in the industry working together collectively in pursuit of common interests, this time on a national basis.

Hence, the evidence thus far arguably demonstrates what can be perceived as a strong shared sense of a collective identity in the TMCI where injustices are identified by workers and successfully shared in different ways. It also shows how a collective identity does not necessarily develop in only one setting as mobilisation theories would imply, but may develop in different ways and at different levels. In this case, at trade level, section level, company level, regional level and national level. This is a significant finding in that it has not been drawn out as an important part of analysis in mobilisation theories. However, these different levels also suggest the existence of potentially differing interests and in what follows, on closer inspection, the evidence demonstrated a lot more inferences and occurrences of inter-group and intra-group fissures within the workforce. This clearly raises issues of the existence of sectionalism which has been argued to be a potential barrier to the creation of collective interests. However, it was discovered that the sectionalism in the TMCI was reinforced by an association with different collective identities which led to a different perspective of sectionalism.

The question of sectionalism and the association with different collective identities

The Occupational Identity

Implications of sectionalism are manifested in several different ways in the TMCI and this arguably also re-emphasises the importance of the historical development of the industry and its unique character. The first, and most prevalent form of sectionalism in the industry, is in the importance of the occupational identity - and there are two perspectives that can be presented here. Firstly, the preservation of the skills required to conduct a job is crucial to protecting the workforces' employment. They do this in several different ways; through strict demarcation lines, a closed shop and no flexibility or interchangeability. There is arguably a fairly understandable reason for this simply in the nature of the industry itself, for the frequent redundancies clearly indicate why the protection of the skills to do a particular job is so important. Nonetheless, the occupational identity is also a potential source of sectionalism in the 'favouring of one's own group over others' (Eldridge, 1968; Brown *et al.*, 1972). This was exemplified through interviews with shop stewards who confirmed the importance of the collective identity of the skilled craftsmen, as stated by Ship Repair Ltd. riggers' shop steward Mick when asked about his role as a shop steward,

At the end of the day, I'm here to represent the boilermakers but to be honest with you, the people that I prefer and always will put first will be the rigging department. I don't make no bones about it with the blokes either, at the end of the day if it's going to be the riggers or another boilermaker trade, for me it's always going to be the riggers.

It is without doubt that this presents evidence of sectionalism in the association with the occupational identity that allows for a clear definition of group membership with one's own trade. However, what is also interesting from this quote is that there is an individual association with two collective identities, the 'boilermakers' as the *trade union group* and the 'riggers' as the *trade group*. This suggests then, that the 'collective identity' may take different forms depending on an individual's association with 'a group' or 'groups'. However, what is perhaps important to observe at this point, is that this form of sectionalism does not appear to affect the 'whole' collective identity with the rest of the workforce as explained below.

When questioned as to the relationship between trades and the workforce as a whole in Ship Repair Ltd, another shop steward explained, "*It's good, cos we've been together for so long*". He also described how the shop stewards' relationship had not always been particularly agreeable and how 'in house' disputes used to be settled,

Oh we've had our fights in disputes, not so much now, but when we used to have our boilermakers meetings, there used to be hair and teeth flying, we used to have some good laughs...in the old days there used to be a cabin along there and they used to settle disputes on their own...round the back, get in there...you used to be walking past and you used to hear the odd thud but we never, I wouldn't actually say that anybody's fell out...even though the last time I had a go at the shipwrights shop steward he got a hammering, but we still speak, you've got to man, cos they're all mates...we're all mates...

This demonstrates, how there can be frictions in the day-to-day working life and similar examples of physical hostility were provided from the other two case study companies. However, it also indicates that, despite conflictual

sectional tensions arising from time to time, there still remains a sense of a shared collective identity in the acknowledgement that 'we're all mates'.

On the subject of 'mates' other evidence also demonstrated how a collective identity external to the boundaries of the organisation was evident, as it was noted that, when the men moved around the different companies on the Tyne following the employment contracts¹¹, "...*you know them all, they're all mates, we know everyone*". This is a significant point as it could certainly be viewed as another association with a collective identity in the extension to the '*regional collective identity*' as identified earlier. Despite this, there was other evidence that demonstrated fissures amongst the workers' 'mates' in the industry.

One example was in Shipbuilders.Co where the shop stewards claimed, "This is a GMB yard". Initially, it was assumed that this statement was due to the fact that the GMB was the only recognised union in Shipbuilders.Co. On the other hand, this yard did not employ only GMB trades and there were many workers who were members of other trade unions which raised questions in relation to solidarity within the whole workforce. It emerged that this claim was possibly due to the nature and timing of the production process in this industry. In shipbuilding, when a new contract begins, the initial skills required are predominantly those of the GMB trades, half way through a contract it is likely to be 50/50 GMB and Unite trades, then at the final outfitting stage, predominantly Unite trades are required. Indeed, the GMB convenor noted that on occasions, other union trades outnumbered those of the recognised union,

It got to the point once when they outnumbered us. If they had got a yard meeting together, if it was allowed to happen, the GMB could find themselves being voted out of a situation or outvoted in a situation and the electricians holding the day.

Again, this quote implies that sectionalism may be a problem in shop steward and workplace collectivism. However, the majority of evidence demonstrated that all of the shop stewards in this company worked together to try to alleviate and control problems of sectionalism amongst the trades in the workforce¹². The major issues usually centred upon differential pay rates and this is discussed in the following section.

Semi Collective Identities

Despite the bargaining of pay for this industry being set at national level, sectional disputes still arise over pay arrangements, either between different union trades or between trades in the same union. In one instance, this was evident between two GMB trades in Shipbuilders.Co whereby welders were being paid a bonus rate for working in smaller spaces and the platers viewed this as an injustice as they were not receiving this bonus and demanded the same rates of pay. The shop stewards met with management to negotiate the differential rates of pay and, after lengthy negotiation, the problem was

¹¹ As highlighted in the background section, due to the frequent redundancies in this industry, the workforce are itinerant and move from yard to yard following new contracts.

¹² For a full discussion of shop steward organisation in the TMCI see McBride 2004

eventually resolved. This is more complicated when subcontracted workers are placed in the picture.

In a different example concerning differences of pay between within single occupational trade groups, it was revealed how, on one occasion, subcontracted crane drivers in the yard were not receiving the same rates of pay. The subcontracted crane drivers were receiving less than those directly employed by the company. Through the usual micromobilisation settings; trade group meetings, section meetings, grouse meetings and mass meetings, the workforce collectively viewed this as an injustice. They collectively agreed to take unofficial strike action to demand the same rates of pay for all crane drivers. Hence, all elements of mobilisation theories can be identified here - they defined their 'interests', directed an 'attribution of blame' to the subcontractor management, 'organised' and 'mobilised' themselves, appeared to be clearly aware of the 'opportunities' available to go in pursuit of their claims, together with 'costs and benefits' of taking action and continued to embark upon 'collective action'. However, Shipbuilders.Co management viewed this action as a breach of contract and locked out the whole workforce. This dispute was eventually resolved with negotiations between shop stewards and management and then management with the subcontractor management so that production could continue. The crane drivers were all eventually provided with the same rate of pay.

Hence, despite earlier implications of inter-union sectionalism, this evidence demonstrates worker solidarity amongst, not only the directly employed workers but also including the subcontracted workers. Therefore the statement 'this is a GMB yard' rather referred to the nature and timing of the production process, for at the time of the interviews, the ship being built was at the stage of production when predominantly trades associated with the GMB were required.

With this in mind, there are two points of interest here in terms of an individual's association with different collective identities. Firstly, in the obvious identification with a *trade union group*, in this instance the GMB, but also interesting from the previous example is that it emphasises a second source of individual identification with a *semi collective production group*. This is evident in the different combinations of *trades* and *trade union groups* at specific stages of the production process, with GMB trades being predominant at the beginning of a contract, a mix of all trades and trade unions in the middle of a contract and then predominantly Unite trades at the final outfitting stage. Hence, three different *semi collective production groups*.

Another example of a 'semi collective identity grouping' can be observed in the 24 hour '3 shift' system that operates in the industry. In this instance, it is three distinct semi collective groups working at different times of the day, or what could be referred to as a *semi collective shift group*. This was a potential obstacle in the achievement of an effective *whole collective identity* in Shipbuilders.Co, when the backshift¹³ group raised a grievance that they were not being involved in the 'whole collective' mass meetings due to the timing their working hours and the time of the meetings. The welders' shop

¹³ Also described as a continental shift, the TMCI operates 24 hour production with a dayshift from 7am – 3pm, a backshift from 3pm to 11pm and a nightshift 11pm to 7am.

steward, Terry, explained how some workers on a later shift had felt aggrieved that they were not able to participate in decision-making or air their grievances at mass meetings due to the time that they were held in the yard,

So we have mass meetings at 2 o'clock now, so it involves the backshift cos we used to have them earlier and they weren't prepared to come in at 7 o'clock for a mass meeting...go home and then come back to work, so it's been adjusted now for 2 o'clock cos they can be there at 2 and the dayshift are there as well...they were complaining that they weren't getting a say, cos they weren't getting a say and weren't getting a vote so it's been put right.

Hence, the grievance was promptly responded to, and resolved by, the shop stewards committee to enable the sectional *semi collective shift groups* to meet as a *whole collective group* and share their collective identity.

To sum up thus far, the evidence has presented different sources of sectionalism from an individual's association with different identities. These different identities have been identified as the *trade group*, *trade union group*, *semi collective production group*, *semi collective shift group* and *the whole collective group*. This evidence has revealed how there can be dynamics and complexity of intra-organisational relations among the workforce based around differing perspectives of interests, injustices and attributions of blame. From the evidence thus far, it would appear that the only constant/stable group that an individual worker in the TMCI is able to directly identify with is the trade group, yet, there was also evidence presented of factions *within* the trade group itself.

Factions within the Trade Groups - The Royals

The most noticeable example of this was in evidence collected at Refit PLC, where 'Royals'¹⁴ were identified as a source of potential conflict between the welders trade group. This was also interesting as it also produced evidence to illustrate how the employer attempted to use the 'Royals' as a form of 'counter mobilisation' (Kelly, 1998:25).

In this example, the workforce had recently sued this company due to a breach of their employment contract during the last bout of redundancies and won £3000 compensation each. However, not all of the workers had received this payment, mainly due to a misunderstanding of, and non-completion of the original claim forms on which they had to indicate their support for legal action. One interviewee explained,

I looked at the form and I thought "well we won't win nowt there, cos we've already fought for that". So I looked at the form and I chucked it in the bin. So I lost £3K and there was a lot of us did that, but we got started again.

When questioned further as to this loss of money and re-employment, he explained,

¹⁴ In this company, redundancies are frequent and centred around the completion of one client contract until a new contract is won and the workforce are gradually re-employed. The 'Royals' are the group who are the first to be employed on new contracts and the last to be made redundant.

They won {the workforce}. But all the lads that signed that form, well I'd say 90% of them didn't get back in the yard. They'd all won £3K each.

Therefore, it was revealed that, during this misunderstanding, the workers who had signed 'the form' indicating their support for legal action against the company had secured compensation, but the majority of these were not re-employed by Refit PLC management.

The chain of events that followed could indeed be viewed as a form of 'counter-mobilisation' by management for they re-employed only 'some' of those workers who had received compensation and placed them among their colleagues who had not received any payment, despite striking over the same issue. In this way, it could be suggested that this action had the potential to create divisions in the workforce, thereby preventing the re-creation of effective collective organisation and identity in the 'new'¹⁵ employment relationship. Indeed, it emerged that this re-employment *had* begun to cause some unrest on the shop floor, particularly from the workforce who had not received a payment.

Some of the blue eyes, we know they're blue eyes, got back in...she {the employee relations manager} hadn't blacklisted them all. Anyway, this one's a Royal cos he was first in, he was the first one amongst the lads who got the £3K, he was a first one in and he was bragging about it saying, 'I got the £3K and I still got in'. He was going to get lynched cos he was shouting his mouth off about it. If you're working alongside a bloke who got 3 grand and you didn't, it's shite. And plus he's rubbing your nose in it.

It is demonstrated in this quote that injustice was beginning to be attributed to other members of the trade group, thereby potentially fracturing the individual association with a collective identity and, more so, of a workforce collective identity. However, it was clearly stressed by the shop stewards that, on this particular occasion, the majority of blame was attributed to management's actions rather than their colleagues implying that the collective identity was not harmed.

As the evidence has demonstrated thus far, divisions were evident from many different sources in the industry that had the potential to cause conflict amongst the workforce. However, what is important to note here is that different solidarities emerge and change depending on the association with a group and what issues are relevant to that particular group or groups. The 'collective identity' may therefore not be assumed to mean uniformity and homogeneity, for in the reality of complex organisational life, day-to-day behaviour may be full of conflicts and tensions but collectivism can still exist. Hence, despite the evidence demonstrating that sectionalism is able to exist in many forms in the TMCI, there were no indications to suggest that this weakened the whole workplace, or indeed regional, collective identity or worker solidarity. Rather, it is suggested that the sectionalism that existed in the industry in fact offered some benefits to the workers and the promotion of workplace collectivism.

¹⁵ 'New' as this was a new contract, with a 'new' workforce employed after a bout of redundancies when the previous contract was completed.

Sectionalism as beneficial to the promotion of workplace collectivism?

In terms of identifying sectionalism between the *trade groups*, it has been demonstrated how different trade groups' meetings were beneficial to the maintenance of the whole collective group identity. The smaller trade groups' meetings on tea breaks offer the ability and opportunity to share any grievances informally and frequently. This bears some resonance to Gall's (1998) quote earlier when he suggested that sectional fights can represent the beginning of a larger more generalised fight. In this paper's evidence, the small trade groups are rather discussing important issues and grievances that they may or may not take to the whole collective, this could indeed lead to mass collective action or simply be a smaller grievance that needs to be shared. Whatever it may be, this demonstrates how sectionalism can be positive to solidarity in the way in which grievances are shared between the workers. It does not negatively affect solidarity or the shared sense of a collective identity. Any injustices identified in this trade group context that are perceived as potentially detrimental to the whole collective, will be swiftly, and more efficiently addressed at either a shop stewards committee meeting or a mass meeting. The significance of this process is the effectiveness of the promotion of workplace organisation and communication through sectional trade group meetings. Indeed, the sectional trade group grievance may not be perceived to be of importance to the whole collective, or may have the potential of adversely affecting the whole collective. Therefore, the 'problem' will be contained within one group and not adversely affect their work colleagues. Indeed, forms of sectionalism between trade groups can manifest in other ways that may also arguably be perceived as being beneficial to the promotion of workforce collectivism. There were other examples of this in the industry and these are examined to help support this point.

The first example of this is from evidence collected from Ship Repair Ltd. One particular weekend, the electricians in Ship Repair Ltd, as a sectional trade group, informed management they were 'not available' for the following weekend overtime. The manager explained,

I mean I talk to them about overtime, and I don't know what they'll say to you, but what they'll say to me is, 'my weekend is my own, you cannot tell me whether I work or not'. They want the weekend work but they want the right to say no. It's in their blood, they will not be told, it's their weekend but by God, if they're not working it {overtime} often enough they'll all be moaning about the reduction in their earnings. Now two or three weekends ago one particular trade, the electricians, said they weren't available for the weekend and hampered the business. Again the problem of the weekend being voluntary, they have a very powerful weapon cos contractually, the contract says that due to the nature of the business they work a reasonable amount of overtime. If it happens that I've worked the electricians three weekends in a row, I know that I generally get a 70% turnout if I ask for weekend volunteers. If the 4th weekend I happen to get 0% of the electricians, I know that manoeuvre is deliberate. So they've got a powerful weapon and they know it.

It was explained that weekend 'voluntary' overtime was customarily always worked by the electricians when it was available, and the manager claimed

that the fact that no-one turned up for overtime was not simply a coincidence, as it was not an isolated incident. Therefore, to claim that they would not be available to work one weekend, the electricians were clearly using temporary restrictive practices as a strategic move to emphasise to management that they have the capacity to exercise their power to pursue their requests, in this instance, a higher overtime rate. Management interpreted this as a form of collective industrial action, as they viewed it as a reaction to their refusal to grant a higher weekend overtime rate. This was clearly an issue that the electricians, as a trade group, had interpreted as an injustice, attributed the blame to management and embarked on a form of collective action that would clearly affect management, as it would have an effect on production. However, a crucial point for the purpose of this discussion is that it would not adversely affect any other of the groups in the workforce, hence not weakening the collective.

A similar example was highlighted in Shipbuilders.Co, when the nightshift group walked out in a 'half-day protest' and refused to work weekend overtime due to the claim that management had breached agreement procedures. Once more, this action did not have a negative effect on the other groups of workers and both of these forms of 'sectional action' were successful in that these groups achieved their objectives. A significant point here is that these *trade groups* and *semi collective shift groups* had the self-confidence, belief in themselves and an incentive to act collectively and successfully without the 'need' to rely upon the whole collective, yet would continue to identify themselves with that collective. These actions were all applied effectively and successfully without relying upon or causing the whole collective group to lose out financially or otherwise. Hence, what this evidence demonstrates is the numerous ways in which solidarities emerge and change depending upon what issues are relevant to a particular group or groups, yet these groups continue to identify with the whole collective. This is an important point and arguably a contribution to other studies on mobilisation theory which will be revisited in the conclusion.

A final issue that needs to be addressed is the entrenched, historical protection of the skills required to conduct a job. However, this form of sectionalism, from the perspective of this article, it is not viewed as negative to worker solidarity in the TMCI. For, in striving to preserve the necessary 'skills' for a certain trade in each yard, the expertise required to conduct this job in any one of the yards on TMCI is consistent. Hence this is a form of protection, not only directly for the workers in a particular trade, trade union or yard, but also for the 'regional collective workforce'. The reason for this comment is that if there is the potential of a redundancy in one yard, the workers will possess the exact relevant skills necessary to simply move to another yard, hence protecting the employment of the 'regional collective group' rather than one trade or one yard. It is argued that, although the protection of the skills required to conduct a job can be viewed as 'sectionalism', here it can be perceived as solidaristic and beneficial to the workforce in the TMCI.

Conclusion

This article set out to consider the question of whether sectionalism can be good for solidarity. It examined this by measuring the collective identity of the TMCI workforce using approaches associated with mobilisation theory. It contributes to other studies using this approach by demonstrating how the theory can also be used to explain the presence of sectionalism. This is significant, for analysis using mobilisation theories is usually used to explain only the presence or absence of collective organisation. The findings reveal that despite evidence of sectionalism, the TMCI workers' relationship continues to constitute a robust collective identity. This contributes to other work, such as the view of Hyman (1975) and more contemporary studies (Gall 1998, 2008), that demonstrate that sectionalism can be positive and may also be beneficial to maintaining solidarity. However, as also pointed out by Hyman (1975:178-179), such a statement may not be as straightforward as it initially appears and the evidence presented in this article draws out significant issues that have the potential to push those debates further. It does this by unravelling some of the complexities of sectionalism and solidarity.

First, it demonstrates how a collective identity does not necessarily develop in only one setting as mobilisation theory implies, but may develop in various ways and at different levels. In this particular case study, this was evident at trade group level, section level, company level, regional level and national level. At each of these different levels is also the existence of differing interests between groups with many inferences of inter-group and intra-group fissures within the workforce. It was discovered that this evidence of sectionalism at each of these levels was reinforced by an association with different collective identities which will now be considered.

The first, and most prevalent form of sectionalism in the industry, is in the association with the 'occupational identity' that allows for a clear definition of group membership with one's own trade group (Eldridge, 1968). However, the evidence also revealed how there may not only be an individual association with one group, but two (or more) collective identities. For instance, an individual may identify with the 'trade' group, the 'trade union' group and the 'regional' collective group identity. This is a very significant point for it suggests that the 'collective identity' may take different forms depending on an individual's association with 'a group' or 'groups'.

There was also evidence of other 'groups' that an individual may associate themselves with – these were described as 'semi collective identities'. For instance, a 'semi collective production group' was evident in the different combinations of trades and trade union groups employed at specific stages of the production process. GMB trades are predominant at the beginning of a contract, a mix of all trades and trade unions in the middle of a contract and then predominantly Unite trades at the final outfitting stage. Hence, there are three different *semi collective production groups*. Also, a *semi collective shift group* was identified in the 24 hour '3 shift' system that operates in the

industry with three distinct semi collective groups working at different times of the day.

Therefore, overall, different solidarities and issues relating to sectionalism will emerge and change depending on the association with a group and what issues are relevant to that particular group or groups at different times. This is all significant for it illustrates the existence of *inter* and *intra* group dynamics, how there can be upswings and downswings in the nature of these dynamics, and how this is a continual process rather than static. The 'collective identity' may therefore not be assumed to mean uniformity and homogeneity, for in the reality of complex organisational life, day-to-day behaviour may be full of conflicts and tensions but collectivism can still exist.

In sum then, it is demonstrated in this paper that notions of 'collectivism' and 'sectionalism' cannot be simply perceived as polar homogeneous entities and the evidence shows how the 'collective identity' can divide as well as unite, which implies that there is 'solidarity within sectionalism'. What is significant overall, and as an answer to the question set out at the beginning of this article, is that there is evidence of collectivism and also of sectionalism, but they appear to nurture each other in this industry, and more crucially, they do this successfully.

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ⁱ Angle-iron smiths, platers, riveters, caulkers, holders-up and drillers were the group of skilled trades that were central to the different phases of the construction of iron ships.

The introduction of these different trades into the industry clearly led to each trade attempting to protect their employment by emphasising the importance of skill required to conduct their work. This was reinforced with the development of union organisation around the job or trade. It was even further reinforced in the apprenticeship, which clearly indicated an identification with the craft and skill allowing for a clear social definition of group membership

(Eldridge 1968:93). The trade union sectionalism and demarcation disputes characteristic of modern shipbuilding became embedded in these divisions in the labour process.

The new main shipbuilding trades became collectively known as the 'black squad'. Each trade had its own 'squad system', whereby groups of workers would contract for a specific job and then precise tasks would be divided up between each squad's skilled workers. There are two significant issues that are relevant here. Firstly, the 'squad system' clearly reinforced the craft identity in that a task allocated to a specific group provided the basis for specialisation within a framework of general skills (Lorenz & Wilkinson 1968:115). Secondly, the new iron ships were now built in different phases, hence requiring particular skills at certain stages of production. Consequently, the need to protect the craft content of a skill of a specific group would be further reinforced due to the threat of cyclical redundancy.

Table 1 Trades involved in demarcation disputes at the end of the Nineteenth Century

1.	shipwright - joiner
2.	fitter - plumber
3.	fitter - driller
4.	fitter - caulkers and hold-cutter
5.	fitter - blacksmith
6.	plumber - tin and iron plate worker
7.	tin and iron worker - plater
8.	angle ironsmith - blacksmith
9.	iron shipwright - caulker
10.	plater - caulker
11.	caulker - driller
12.	painter - red leader

(Clarke 1966:414; Clarke in McCord 1977:121)

The first listed dispute between shipwrights and joiners became so problematic that it led to external political intervention. In an attempt to arbitrate in the situation, the Tyne Joint Committee of Shipwrights and Joiners was created in 1893 and, although this did not end the disputes, it did reduce their duration (Dougan 1968:125).